



Developing usable submission guidelines for authors and editors

By Gary Michael Smith

Developing effective and usable instructions for submitting manuscripts is of paramount importance for expeditiously handling and publishing peer-reviewed articles. Effective instructions benefit authors, since some journals return submissions that do not comply with their established guidelines. Clear, unambiguous submission guidelines also help the editorial office staff: the better a paper adheres to journal's, publisher's, and printer's requirements, the less work editorial staff must request of the authors. To this end, the journal staff is responsible for ensuring that authors are aware of and thoroughly understand how to submit manuscripts.

A method to the madness

When developing guidelines, ensure that appropriate justification exists for all requirements before you make them policy. Performing and writing about research is stressful enough without adding the burden of illogical criteria and unnecessarily stringent submission requirements. For instance, it may not be necessary to ask authors to submit multiple sets of high-resolution glossy prints of line drawings for the peer-review process when photocopies clearly and adequately illustrate the information.

Since a paper could be rejected after initial review, authors may have wasted their time and money adhering to burdensome guidelines, and now may have to reformat their entire manuscript for submission to another journal. Consequently, although written justification may not be possible because of space considerations, it is in the best interests of the

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authors—whose submissions permit the existence of a journal—to include only requirements that facilitate an effective, accurate, and swift review.

Global thinking

Inasmuch as nonfrivolous requirements save time and money, a journal that targets an international audience needs a certain expanded mindset when developing effective guidelines. Such considerations should include sensitivity to the following:

- Avoid gender-specific language. Develop a format such as "he or she" or "s/he" when addressing readers.
- Language barriers: Avoid slang, vernacular, and casual or colloquial writing. Try not to use undefined abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms since these may not be standard in all languages. Always remember that some readers may speak a different first language than that in which you developed the instructions.
- Economic constraints: Some research groups may lack high-tech facilities for producing expensive graphics formats, so request only those formats required for the review process.

As with any written material, the major consideration when developing instructions to authors is the audience, who include:

- The authors writing the manuscript and who are concerned with content and research issues
- The authors' editors, who ensure proper terminology and style are used

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Editorial: Journals and more journals

by Geoff Hart

Back once again is prolific author Gary Michael Smith, who has provided the first in a two-part series on journal submission guidelines. In this issue, Gary discusses how to create the guidelines; in the next issue, he'll conclude with an article on how journal staff should work with authors to ensure compliance with these guidelines. How do you get to be part of a journal's staff? Why not apply for the STC "journal editor fellowship program", a program designed to provide new journal editors with financial and other support for the first year of their job. Details appear in the June 2001 issue of *Intercom*, but you can also find out more on the STC Web site (www.stc.org/PDF_Files/101-00.pdf) or contact Lottie Applewhite (lottieapplewhite@mindspring.com) for details.



Dan Wise, a senior member and *eminence grise* in the SIG concludes this issue with his opinions on the recent Council of Science Editors publication, *Levels of technical editing*. Dan is also working with Marilyn O'Leary, another SIG member, to summarize some of the debate that's arisen lately on the merits and demerits of online publishing of scientific papers. Keep your eyes open for these articles, hopefully by the end of the year.

It was great to meet so many of you at the STC conference in Chicago. Apparently our SIG is now closing on 800 members, a healthy number. Many of us were at the conference, judging by the number of people I spoke to. If you can make it to next year's conference, I encourage you to do so; it's an unparalleled opportunity to meet and talk to kindred spirits.

I'd like to pass along regrets from Amy Burdan, our SIG manager. Amy had fully intended to provide her first contribution to the newsletter, but life had other plans. With luck, we'll have something in the next issue. Ω

Conference: "Communicating the future: best practices in communicating science and technology to the public"

23–25 September 2001, Gaithersburg, Maryland: This "first international peer-reviewed conference on public communication of science and technology" is aimed at science communicators, educators, journalists, and others who practice communicating science and technology to non-scientist publics. Up to 50 entrants will be selected to present papers and will receive a US\$750 travel stipend and complimentary registration (normal registration is US\$100). The submission deadline is 1 July 2001, and notification of selected presenters will occur the week of 6 August 2001. For further information, visit the conference Web site: www.nist.gov/bestpractices Ω

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- Editorial assistants, who are concerned with style and format requirements when preparing the paper for submission.

One way to simplify the guidelines is to match the flow of the instructions to the actual process of manuscript development. For example, concerns regarding the Abstract format can be addressed near the beginning, whereas reference requirements can appear near the end. Also, it can be useful to review the requirements from other journals to broaden your perspective. It's helpful to be aware of as many alternatives as possible.

As a rule, the best guidelines are not overly demanding, since adherence to some requirements may be necessary only once a paper is accepted for publication or has passed a second review. For instance, it's probably unnecessary to demand labor-intensive tasks, such as acquiring the necessary signatures on copyright and permission forms or submitting an electronic copy on diskette, until you're certain the paper will be published. It's often more appropriate to request some items in a multistage process using a different checklist at each stage.

Guidelines can be made available in print or via a Web site. If a journal is published wholly or partially online, its Web address should be included in the guidelines. By visiting this site, potential authors will be better able to decide if the journal is an appropriate venue for their papers and will find it easier to budget the time and resources for preparing a submission.

Checklists

Checklists are a good way to facilitate adherence to requirements that differ among multiple stages. This approach avoids burdening authors with compliance with the full set of requirements upon initial submission of a manuscript. One checklist could appear in the instructions to authors, providing a condensed version of the major requirements for the first stage of the review process (see “Author's checklist” on page 4). Such checklists can be

photocopied, checked off, and included with the submission. Checklists may also be useful for style and format, and for the final materials necessary for publication. An upcoming issue of *The Exchange* will provide more details on this topic.

If the manuscript survives the initial reviews with a recommendation for minor or major revisions, editorial staff should send a “checklist for style” with the decision letter. This checklist details requirements the paper did not initially meet but that were not important enough to justify returning the paper; these include double-spacing figure legends or the need to include the first names of individuals in the Acknowledgments section. Authors can incorporate such revisions while they address more substantive issues raised by the reviewers.

If the paper is accepted for publication, send a “final checklist” to request the materials required for publication, such as diskettes; signatures on copyright or acknowledgment agreements; and corrections of page numbers, figure or caption titles, or reference order.

Components of instructions to authors

Using section headers in the guidelines helps to direct readers along a hierarchical path while allowing them to find specific information at a glance. The following sections provide examples.

Journal mission

When seeking an appropriate forum for a research paper, authors—if they haven't already chosen a journal—may peruse the guidelines of numerous publications they consider suitable. Thus, the first paragraph should display information such as the journal's mission or purpose, the areas of research considered, the audience, and the frequency of publication. This section should also include contact information for the editor.

Categories

If the journal publishes various categories of papers, clearly delineate these. Examples include regular contributions, rapid submissions, brief

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reviews, editorials or commentaries, letters to the editor, and responses to these letters.

Fees and charges

Provide information on manuscript submission fees, page charges, charges for the reproduction of color figures and halftones, reprint costs, and charges for authorial corrections. Mention these items early, since these expenses may be prohibitive for some authors.

Author’s checklist

To expedite handling of submissions, include an author’s checklist in the instructions so you can detail any requirements that, if followed in the initial submission, will expedite handling of the manuscript, even if the submission is eventually rejected. For example, include:

- a statement of submission they can use to describe what is being submitted (e.g., regular contribution vs. editorial)
- a “copyright transfer” form with room for signatures of all authors or for one author with signature authority for all others, and a “permission to be acknowledged” form for anyone mentioned in the Acknowledgments
- format instructions and a reference to the appropriate style guide.
- an indication of the number of copies of the manuscript that you require (i.e., one per reviewer, plus any copies your office needs)
- a request for at least one set of the original figures for the journal editor, not attached to the manuscript, and an additional copy attached to the manuscript for each reviewer
- the order for the various parts of the submission: e.g., title page, abstract, acknowledgments, text, figure legend, figures, tables, references
- a request for a list of suggested reviewers and their complete mailing addresses, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail addresses
- instructions on how to respond to review comments (e.g., respond to each comment from each reviewer, and indicate whether the

“To expedite handling of submissions, include an author’s checklist in the instructions.”

“Clearly define any requirements for transferring the copyright.”

suggestions were incorporated and why or why not)

- a request for a transmittal letter that accompanies the revisions, clearly indicating which components (e.g., figures, tables, or text) were changed
- a request for a transmittal letter that accompanies the accepted paper
- instructions on how to prepare an electronic version of the manuscript (e.g., the title, first author’s name, date of submission, and software name and version used). If the paper has been revised since the last submission, include one original printout and one photocopy of the most recent version of the manuscript. If the images have been changed, include one set of original printouts of figures as well as photocopies attached to each copy.

Statement of submission

The author’s cover letter should include a standard statement that “all authors have read and approved the submission of the manuscript and that it has not been submitted elsewhere in any language or any format other than as an abstract”. The copyright transfer agreement could incorporate this statement, since all authors—or one representative—must assign the copyright. If the copyright form will serve as the statement of submission, authors should include it in their initial submission.

Copyright, acknowledgment, and permission

Clearly define any requirements for transferring the copyright. Some journals require signed copyright releases before they send a manuscript for review; others accept a statement of submission instead. Some authors may choose not to submit a paper if they cannot retain the copyright. Others may assign the journal a “right to publish” rather than relinquishing copyright.

Some publishers require original signatures by each author, whereas others let a single author sign. Some journals will accept faxed, photocopied, or digital images of signatures, especially when the authors are numerous and

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widely dispersed. Ensure that the authors understand these requirements in your instructions.

Remind authors that if they have used figures, tables, or text from other articles, they must acquire permission to reprint from the copyright holder (which is often the journal rather than the author).

Style and format

Define your preferred style guide within the instructions to authors. In your own guidelines, identify only requirements that are specific to the journal, such as:

- Length limits (e.g., no more than 25 double-spaced, typed pages)
- Character limits (e.g., no special codes such as italics, bolding, or text justification)
- Preferred file formats (e.g., RTF, PDF, or HTML)
- Reference style (e.g., name plus date vs. numbered references; reference section in alphabetical vs. numerical order)
- Number of photocopies of the manuscript required
- A legend or table in the beginning of the manuscript that identifies all acronyms, abbreviations, and initialisms.
- How to submit the final version of an accepted paper (e.g., one original hard copy and a file in RTF, PDF, or HTML format). This may include the type of storage medium (e.g., a 3½-inch diskette or CD), clearly labeled with the software name and version used to generate the text, figures, and tables.

Figure and table format

High-quality graphics are one of the most important—and expensive—aspects of a submission. Journals may require figures in certain formats and in multiple copies in addition to attaching photocopies to the manuscript. Following this procedure helps to ensure that reviewers have high-quality graphics to review.

Tables must also be designed for maximum readability. For example, all columns should have headings, even if they seem self-

explanatory. For those who wish to use footnotes, propose a standard set of symbols in the instructions.

Component ordering

Specify the order for all components of a manuscript to ensure that presentation of the data flows smoothly and to help readers follow the research. This order also helps production staff to prepare an accepted manuscript for publication.

Authorship

Journals, editors, and authors commonly have different opinions on what constitutes authorship, so you should spell out your policy clearly. For example, some journals include only those who actually wrote parts of the manuscript, whereas others list the study’s or the department’s director and possibly others who didn’t participate in the research. One good source of advice is the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors special report “Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals” (Annals of Internal Medicine 1997; 126:36-47 or see www.icmje.org). The order of the authors should be left to the submitters.

Rewards

One of the primary goals of an editorial office, besides offering a fair and unbiased peer review, is to proceed through the review and publication process in a way that guarantees the most expeditious handling of the manuscript possible. Developing a useful and understandable set of guidelines that helps you attain much better compliance can provide such a guarantee. **Ω**

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Much of the material from this article is taken from the author’s book The peer-reviewed journal: a comprehensive guide through the editorial process, ISBN 0-9658380-7-2 (Chatgris Press, 2000). For more information, contact the author at ChatgrisPress@yahoo.com.

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“Ensure that reviewers have high-quality graphics to review.”

*"What if there are other optical illusions about our existence that are just as major as the illusion of the sun revolving around the earth? ... What are the odds that we live in exactly the window of human existence when all the major optical illusions have been discovered? Wouldn't that be an amazing coincidence, since every previous generation of humans has believed that they were born in that window of time? They were all wrong, but they all thought they were right, just like we do now."—Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Future. Thriving on business stupidity in the 21st century.**

"One of the flaws in science is that it has considered that the meaning of information is inherent in the information; that is, any intelligent being looking at the information would know its meaning. Well that is absolutely a false concept and the falsity can be demonstrated quite easily. The

meaning of information is assigned by consciousness within the context of experience."—Dr. Edgar Mitchell, Apollo 14 astronaut

"A science is any discipline in which the fool of this generation can go beyond the point reached by the genius of the last generation."—Max Gluckman

*"Skeptics say, 'until scientific tests are independently replicated, no conclusion can be made about the thing being tested'. That's great, except I will live my entire life without ever personally testing anything with scientific rigor. All I will ever use are unreliable media reports about other people who tested things... That's not irrational. That's living in the real world."—Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Future. Thriving on business stupidity in the 21st century.**

Comparing levels of edit and levels of technical editing

By Daniel E. Wise

After reading David Nadziejka's article ("Levels of Edit Redux") in the July 2000 issue of *the Exchange*, I was vaguely aware of an uncomfortable feeling. Thus it was that I, being unable to find my copy of the first edition of Mary Fran Buehler and Robert van Buren's *Levels of Edit*, purchased a second edition from STC, and purchased a copy of Nadziejka's *Levels of Technical Editing* from the Council of Science Editors.

After looking at the two publications side by side I have concluded that *Levels of Edit* can be likened to a stack of bread slices in that each level of edit layers more on top of what is already there in the lower levels. With this analogy in mind, I consider Nadziejka's *Levels of Technical Editing* to be a diagonal slice through that stack.

Where van Buren and Buehler consider the tasks inherent in the life of a technical editor in an industrial environment, Nadziejka aims his commentary more at the staff or freelance editor

who is primarily concerned with more scholarly publishing. Van Buren and Buehler combine nine defined tasks into five levels of edit that range from minimal to exhaustive. Nadziejka combines some tasks and groups them into three *types* of edit that bear a strong resemblance to the five previously mentioned.

Let me hasten to say that my background and experience are significantly different from Nadziejka's. Where he has been associated through much of his career with research facilities in the sciences, I have spent 45 years editing proposals, specifications, standards, technical reports and, yes, monographs and journal articles dealing more with the engineering disciplines and the physical sciences. For that reason, if no other, I tend to relate more to van Buren and Buehler's levels of edit than I do to Nadziejka's.

I have problems with some of Nadziejka's assumptions. He tries in the introduction to his CSE Guideline to differentiate what he presents from what the earlier guideline covers. He defines technical documents as "intellectual, scholarly, or highly complex documents in any field". I find this definition narrow and

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"Nadziejka aims his commentary more at the staff or freelance editor who is primarily concerned with more scholarly publishing."

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misleading because it is aimed at a specialized audience: journal editors. This does not cover the broad range of other kinds of editors. I have edited manuscripts up to and including doctoral dissertations in the field of celestial mechanics and as mundane as assembly and operational procedures for mechanical equipment. All were *technical* in that they presumed some level of technical expertise on the part of the reader.

I also question his assumption that technical editors are responsible for the accuracy of technical content since his definition of technical documents makes no mention of the subject matter expertise needed to fill this role. In my career I have found few editors who were sufficiently expert in the subject matter being edited to be able to assume this responsibility. Perhaps it is possible if a PhD chemist, for example, were engaged to edit scholarly journal articles on pharmaceutical research. However, it is not usual for the freelance editor in general or the staff editor in an industrial setting.

Those editors must often deal with a broad range of technical topics in a wide range of technical fields and disciplines. Experience will help the seasoned editor recognize the symptoms of technical problems, but probably not the disease itself. In general, technical accuracy (and adequacy) will be determined by either an internal peer or management review before submittal to a journal or by peer review through the journal itself. To assume that the editor would be likely to catch many technical errors that crept through these reviews is problematical for me.

Where van Buren and Beuhler emphasize that the level of edit is established in a contract, either formal or informal, between the author and the editorial supervisor, Nadziejka treats his levels more loosely, as is perhaps necessary with freelance editors in particular. The caveat I offer here is that the freelance editor billing by the job is quite likely to get burned by an author if the job is priced sight unseen. Moreover, while informal agreements may work fine when

author and editor have an established working relationship, they are unlikely to work as well when the editor is dealing with an author for the first time. In those instances, which freelancers encounter routinely, the editor should rigorously define what the client expects in writing, and use this as the basis for a contract.

Nadziejka inserts an informal fourth level of edit, the Short Edit, as a possibility when there is more time allocated than needed for his Rush Edit, but not enough for a Standard Edit. He calls this “an undefined level of edit.” Van Buren and Beuhler, with their five levels and nine tasks, define this type of edit.

I did not find a great deal of new material in *Levels of Technical Editing*. As I said at the outset, it seems to me that Nadziejka has taken a diagonal slice through the stacked levels defined 25 years ago at JPL.

Overall, Nadziejka’s guidelines have value for a certain segment of the editorial world; however, as one who has been in the trenches for over four decades, I have to say that I still find the original *Levels of Edit* more appropriate and more useful for the kinds of work many editors, particularly those working in an industrial setting, are normally called upon to do. If I were working freelance or as a staff editor in the biological sciences, perhaps I might find it otherwise. Ω

References

Nadziejka, D. 2000. *Levels of technical editing*. Council of Science Editors, Reston, Va.

Van Buren, R.; Buehler, M.F. 1980. *The levels of edit*. Society for Technical Communication, Arlington, Va.

Daniel E. Wise has been a technical editor and writer for 45 years, working in the fields of chemicals, light metals, solid-fuel rocketry, aerospace, avionics, ship-building, and electric utilities, and in the building trades. He is currently the technical editor at the Southern Building Codes Congress International in Birmingham, Alabama.

“While informal agreements may work fine when author and editor have an established working relationship, they are unlikely to work as well when the editor is dealing with an author for the first time.”

“Experience will help the seasoned editor recognize the symptoms of technical problems, but probably not the disease itself.”

Join us on STC's Scientific Communication SIG mailing list!

STC runs an Internet-based e-mail discussion group for the Science SIG. It's a quiet, friendly place to turn for help if you've got questions concerning scientific communication. If you'd like to join, point your Web browser to <http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcscsig-L>

There's no cost to join, and you can expect a very low volume of mail. Of course, the more people join, the more traffic there'll be, so please join. It's a great way to make the SIG work for you.

Two other mailing lists of interest to Science SIG members:

Copyediting-l: discussions of editing in all its various forms. To subscribe, send the message "subscribe copyediting-L Your name" (with no quotes, and with your actual name instead of "Your name") to Listserv@listserv.indiana.edu

Techwr-l: discussions of the tools and travails of the technical writer. To subscribe, send the message "subscribe techwr-L Your name" (with no quotes, and with your actual name instead of "Your name") to Lyris@lists.raycomm.com

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